CLAIMS

I claim:

1.   A method of encouraging payments associated with a computer system, the method comprising the steps of:

        providing to the computer system current customer information from a database, the current customer information including a shutoff value;

        comparing the shutoff value and a current value of the computer system; and

        enabling use of the computer system if the current value of the computer system is less than the shutoff value.

2.   The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:

        disabling use of the computer system if the current value is greater than the shutoff value.

3.   The method of claim 2, wherein the step of disabling use of the computer system includes not allowing access to an operating system of the computer system.

4.   The method of claim 1, wherein the shutoff value includes a shutoff date and the current value includes a current date.

5.   The method of claim 1, wherein the current value is determined from a system clock of the computer system and wherein the method further comprises the steps of:

        detecting whether the system clock of said computer system has been changed in an unauthorized manner; and

        disabling the computer system based upon detecting the system clock has been changed in the unauthorized manner.

6.   The method of claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

        determining whether the computer system is within a pre-notification period corresponding to the shutoff value; and

displaying a warning message if the computer system is within a pre-notification period corresponding to the shutoff value.

7.   The method of claim 1, wherein the current customer information is provided in response to a request for the current customer information from the computer system, the request being initiated by the computer system when a connection between the computer system and the communication link is established.

8.   The method of claim 7, wherein the communication link is the Internet and the request includes a document being sent to an active server page.

9.   The method of claim 8, wherein the document sent to the active server page is an extensible markup language document.

10.   The method of claim 7, wherein the communication link is the Internet and the computer system includes a pre-packaged account with an Internet Service Provider for establishing the connection between the computer system and the communication link.

11.   The method of claim 7, wherein general and specific messages are provided to the computer system in the current customer information.

12.   The method of claim 1, wherein the current value of the computer system is compared to the shutoff value during a system startup process of the computer system.

13.   A computer readable medium for encouraging payments associated with a computer system, the computer readable medium comprising a plurality of instructions which when executed by the computer system cause the computer system to:

compare a retrieved shutoff value and a current value of the computer system, the shutoff value being based upon a credit associated with the computer system and the current value being based upon a system clock of the computer system; and

enable use of the computer system based upon determining that the retrieved shutoff value is greater than the current value.

14. The computer readable medium of claim 13, wherein the plurality of instructions when executed by the computer system further cause the computer system to:

disable use of the computer system if the shutoff value is less than the current value.

15. The computer readable medium of claim 14, wherein the step of disabling use of the computer system includes not allowing access to an operating system of the computer system.

16. The computer readable medium of claim 13, wherein the plurality of instructions when executed by the computer system further cause the computer system to:

detect whether the system clock of the computer system has been changed in an unauthorized manner; and

disable use of the computer system based upon detecting that the system clock has been changed in the unauthorized manner.

17. A method of establishing a usage period associated with a computer system for a user, comprising the steps of:

notifying the user that a payment associated with the computer system is due by a first shutoff value;

receiving a second shutoff value;

providing the second shutoff value to the computer system through a communication link; and

enabling use of the computer system if a current value of the computer system is less than the second shutoff value.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of:

disabling use of the computer system if the current value of the computer system is greater than the second shutoff value.

19.   The method of claim 18, wherein the step of disabling use of the computer system includes not allowing access to an operating system of the computer system.

20.   The method of claim 17, wherein the current value corresponds to the value of a system clock of the computer system and wherein the method further comprises the steps of:

        detecting whether the system clock of the computer system has been changed in an unauthorized manner; and

        disabling the computer system based upon detecting the system clock has been changed in the unauthorized manner.

21.   The method of claim 17, wherein the second shutoff value is retrieved from a vendor which provided the computer system to the user and wherein the second shutoff value corresponds to a credit or debit being associated with the computer system.

22.   The method of claim 21, wherein the second shutoff value is provided to the computer system in response to a request from the computer system, the request being initiated by the computer system when a connection between the computer system and the communication link is established.

23.   The method of claim 22, wherein the communication link is the Internet and the request includes a document being sent to an active server page.

24.   The method of claim 17, further comprising the steps of:

        storing the second shutoff value in a database; and

        receiving a request for the second shutoff value from the computer system through the communication link.

25.   A method of encouraging payments associated with a computer system, the method comprising the steps of:

providing to the computer system current customer information from a database, the current customer information including a shutoff value, which is based upon at least one credit associated with the computer system;

comparing the shutoff value to a current value of the computer system; and

enabling use of the computer system based upon the comparison of the current value and the shutoff value.

26.   The method of claim 25, wherein the computer system is enabled if the current value of the computer system is less than the shutoff value and wherein the computer system is disabled if the current value of the computer system is greater than the shutoff value.

27.   The method of claim 26, wherein the computer system is disabled by not allowing access to an operating system of the computer system.

28.   The method of claim 25, wherein the shutoff value includes a shutoff date and the current value includes a current date.

29.   The method of claim 25, wherein the current value is determined from a system clock of the computer system and wherein the method further comprises the steps of:

detecting whether the system clock of said computer system has been changed in an unauthorized manner; and

disabling the computer system based upon detecting the system clock has been changed in the unauthorized manner.

30.   The method of claim 25, further comprising the steps of:

determining whether the computer system is within a pre-notification period corresponding to the shutoff value; and

displaying a warning message if the computer system is within a pre-notification period corresponding to the shutoff value.

31. The method of claim 25, wherein the current customer information is provided in response to a request for the current customer information from the computer system, the request being initiated by the computer system when a connection between the computer system and the communication link is established.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein the communication link is the Internet and the request includes a document being sent to an active server page.

33. The method of claim 32, wherein the document sent to the active server page is an extensible markup language document.

34. The method of claim 31, wherein the communication link is the Internet and the computer system includes a pre-packaged account with an Internet Service Provider for establishing the connection between the computer system and the communication link.

35. The method of claim 25, wherein the current value of the computer system is compared to the shutoff value during a system startup process of the computer system.